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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the use of stand-up comedy routines to demonstrate principles of public speaking to college students in communication classes. The paper examines particular elements of the public speaking process, which include the structural elements of speeches: (1) introductions; (2) the body of the speech, including organization, transitions, signposts, and aspects of vocal and physical delivery; (3) conclusions; and (4) non-structural elements of speeches, including language, visual aids, and modes of delivery. Specific elements of this process are defined as they are presented in contemporary basic communication course textbooks. The paper then applies examples of parallel elements and behaviors observed in videotaped clips of standup comedy routines to these principles of public speaking to demonstrate how video clips of comedians can teach students how to apply these elements and techniques to their classroom and public presentations. Contains 35 references. (SR)

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USING VIDEO-TAPED EXAMPLES OF STAND-UP COMEDY ROUTINES TO TEACH PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Introduction

Since the development of cable television and its insinuation into the fabric of everyday life, several performance mediums have become very popular with television audiences. One such medium is stand-up comedy. Most cable networks offer significant amounts of specific programming centering around stand-up comedy. For instance, the Arts and Entertainment network offers "Evening at the Improv," MTV offers "The Half-hour Comedy Hour," and VH-1 offers "Stand-up Spotlight," to name but a few. In addition, there is also the Comedy Channel, which offers many hours of programming daily that features stand-up comedy such as "The A-List," "Stand-up, Stand-up" and "London Underground," as well as the many comedy specials that appear on movie channels such as HBO and Showtime.

Commercial networks also offer many programs featuring stand-up comedy, and many standup comedians continue to appear in and create prime time programs in which they practice their comedic skills either directly or indirectly. Standup comics who have appeared in situation comedies on commercial television include Jack Benny, Redd Foxx, Bill Cosby, Billy Crystal, Roseanne Arnold and Jerry Seinfeld. Late night programming on commercial networks has also frequently provided a forum for stand-up comedy and that tradition still continues today. Programs such as "The Tonight Show," "The Late Show with David Letterman" and "Late Night with Conan O'Brian" continue to offer opportunities for new and established comedians to practice their craft.

As stand-up comedy has become more a part of mainstream American consciousness, it is interesting to note that many potential parallels may exist between the structure and delivery of stand-up comedy and the structure and delivery of public speaking assignments that take place in many of our communication classes. Stand-up comedy routines often contain introductions, bodies, conclusions, organizational patterns, visual aids, transitions, signposts and

many other elements of public speeches. At the same time, such elements are also sometimes missing from standup comedy routines, just as they are sometimes missing from our student's speeches.

Since these parallels seemingly do exist, and since stand-up comedy routines have become so popular with contemporary audiences, perhaps the potential also exists to use these routines as tools to demonstrate to students principles of public speaking. Such an avenue might be more interesting to students than other sources, and they might help demonstrate to students that principles of public speaking apply to performance situations outside of public speaking forums. For instance, Burke (1945) was among the first rhetorical scholars to formally acknowledge the performative nature of the act of public speaking when he created his pentad and applied it to public speaking and other rhetorical situations as a critical tool. Current thought and research in the areas of performance studies and theatre also acknowledge the place of performance in many aspects of everyday life (Athaneses, 1991; Carlin, 1992; Hopper, 1992; Langellier, 1989; Pelias and VanOosting, 1987; and Schechner, 1985). Life itself is dramatic and performative. Opportunities to develop skills which help us "perform" in public situations are invaluable. The critical, analytic and performative skills that are learned in public speaking are also very useful in other communicative aspects and contexts of life. Using videotaped examples of standup comedians to teach principles of public speaking will reinforce to students that the skills they learn in our public communication classrooms can be applied to other communication contexts and situations.

This topic is also of further interest to us in communication due to the many recent advances in video, audio and computer technology. More and more we are seeing the use of video and audio tapes and computer programming to assist in delivering and teaching course content. The use of video and audio clips in the classroom helps maintain student interest, clarify ideas and concepts, and provides us

with new ways to revitalize our approaches to teaching. As we move into the 21st Century, we will find ourselves using video, audio and computer technology more and more. This is but one more way to begin to investigate applications of technology to our teaching.

Statement of Purpose

This paper investigates the use of stand-up comedy routines to demonstrate principles of public speaking to college students in contemporary communication classes. Particular elements of the public speaking process will be investigated. These include structural elements of speeches, such as: (1) introductions; (2) the body of the speech, including organization, transitions, signposts, and aspects of vocal and physical delivery; (3) conclusions and (4) non-structural elements of speeches, including language, visual aids and modes of delivery. These specific elements of the public speaking process will be defined as they are presented in contemporary basic communication course textbooks. Examples of parallel elements and behaviors observed in videotaped clips of standup comedy routines will then be applied to these principles of public speaking to demonstrate how these video clips of comedians can used to demonstrate and teach students how to,apply these elements and techniques to their classroom and public presentations.

The Introduction

Most public speaking text books and instructors agree that the introduction of the speech is a very important part of delivering a "good" speech. Many textbooks and instructors urge students to create introductions which fulfill at least four objectives: (1) to gain their audience's attention, (2) to state the purpose or topic of the speech, (3) to preview the main points of the speech and (4) to establish the

speaker's credibility (Lucas, 1989; Pearson and Nelson, 1994; Smith, 1992 and Verderber, 1988).

While some standup comics do not use introductions at all, others appear to very carefully craft introductions, which do indeed fulfill some, if not all, of the objectives cited in many public speaking textbooks. It is interesting to note the effect the presence or absence of an introduction has on a standup comedy routine and on the style of the performer. Such observations might also be of interest to students as a demonstration of the impact of introductions on public performances.

Teachers of public speaking often encourage their students to use very specific strategies to gain their audience's attention; such as asking a question, telling a story, or citing a quotation or some statistics. Strategies that standup comedians use to gain audience attention can also be brought to our students' attention as a means of reinforcing the need for this element of the introduction. Asking audiences rhetorical or real questions is one strategy that is encouraged by teachers of public speaking and that is used by standup comics. The questions that standup comedians use may be as mundane as asking the audience: "Is anyone here from New York City?", "Hey, how about . . .", or "Are you ready to have a good time?" Or the questions may be more specific, such as comedians who ask audiences if they have had experiences similar to the situations the comics describe in their routines. For instance, Mark Pitha (1993), refers to the experience of listening to a car radio and driving into a tunnel. He then asks his audience if they have encountered this experience, and if they try to match the lyrics to the song that is playing while they have lost the station temporarily in the tunnel. Such examples serve to demonstrate to students the importance of including such strategies in their speeches.

Another attention getting device that is often recommended in the communication classroom is to startle or shock the audience. This strategy is frequently employed by standup comedians. For instance, comedian Judy Tennada

(1993) begins her routine by using several different vocal pitches and volumes that are quite unexpected by her audience to gain their attention. She might begin by shrieking very loudly in a high, shrill voice, then switches to a deeper, more raspy vocal intonation. Chris Strobeck begins his routine by shouting at the audience and making a series of "ninja" like motions to gain audience attention. These strategies also provide instructors an opportunity to talk to students about the importance of making specific vocal and physical choices to reinforce the content of their public speeches.

One particularly unusual example of gaining an audience's attention is demonstrated by Stanley Oman (1993). He begins his routine by carrying a cup of coffee on stage. Before he begins addressing the audience he makes quite a show of putting sugar and a non-dairy creamer in the coffee, takes a couple of sips, then asks the audience: "What are you looking at? When you go to work you don't get started immediately, do you?" These unexpected behaviors and the strategy of asking audiences rhetorical and real questions provide some very interesting examples to reinforce for students the importance of developing specific strategies to gain an audience's attention.

Another strategy we encourage our students to use in introducing their speeches is to provide a statement of purpose and a preview of main points that will be covered in the speech. Of course, the structure and intent of a standup comic's act differ significantly from the structure and intent of beginning communication students' classroom speeches. So, while we often encourage our students to specifically state the purpose or topic of their speeches and to specifically preview the main points of their speeches, standup comics rarely perform these functions as concretely as our students need to. In fact, many comedians rely on surprise and spontaneity in their performances and specifically avoid such devices. But, some comedians do use some formats that provide audiences with previews of topics and/or

main points. It is to our advantage as teachers that these distinct styles exist because we can better demonstrate to our students these differences in style by sharing with them routines that offer these elements and routines that don't offer them.

Dennis Miller (1988, 1990) is one example of a comedian who often provides a distinct introduction to his comedy routine. While Miller does not provide his audiences with explicitly stated previews of main points or specific purposes, he does implicitly preview the direction his routine will take. In many cases, Miller begins his routine with a series of brief, disconnected observations on topics related to current affairs and news items. These observations constitute the "introduction" to Miller's comedy routine. Following these observations, Miller then generally moves to the "body" of his routine, in which he selects several topics that he explores in much more depth and detail. Miller's humor often focuses on news and current events and the "introduction" he provides prepares his audience for his particular style of comedy and the topics that he will dissect.

Another important element of speech introductions is establishing the speaker's credibility. Many public speaking textbooks acknowledge that while it is important to establish the speaker's credibility in the introduction of the speech, the element of credibility is also evaluated by the audience throughout the speech, and is ultimately decided upon after the speech concludes (Adler and Rodman, 1994; Berko, Wolvin and Wolvin, 1992; Gouran, Wiethoff and Doelger, 1994; and Seiler, 1988). For this reason, it is also possible to use examples of standup comedians routines to demonstrate to students how the element of credibility functions to benefit the speaker. While standup comedians rarely formally establish their credibility in the introduction of their routines, they often make statements to establish their credibility during their routines and they often use strategies to demonstrate the similarities of their values with the values of the audience, another means of

establishing credibility. Such statements may be as mundane as: "Do you all do that?", "Have you ever . . ." or "I know that you all have . . ." Or the comedian may employ the strategy again of asking the audience specific questions relating to the topic at hand.

Some comics also seem to use self-deprecating humor as means of gaining credibility and/or sympathy from the audience. For instance, Anita Wise (1993) has blonde hair and tells several blonde jokes during her routine. She then uses the audiences' positive responses toward her personally to gain credibility with her audience and to gain their "approval." Comic Randall Sheridan uses a similar strategy. One part of his routine delves into his childhood and he explains that he was not popular with his classmates as a child because he looked like the cartoon character "Magilla Gorilla." His audience seems to react with sympathy and he uses this response to gain their "approval," thus increasing his credibility.

Many public speaking instructors agree that the introduction of the speech is of vital importance to creating and delivering a good speech. These are but a few of the functions and strategies that can be used to create and deliver a good introduction, and but a few examples of excerpts from standup comedy routines that can be used to demonstrate to students the importance of these strategies and their application to delivering a competent presentation. There are many other possibilities for using these materials to teach our students about introductions to speeches. We have only to continue to explore and use them.

The Body of the Speech

When discussing creating and delivering the body of the speech, we teach our students many different elements and strategies. Some examples of the primary topics we discuss with our students include: organization, transitions, signposts, and aspects of vocal and physical delivery. As was the case in the speech introduction,

many of the behaviors and strategies employed by standup comedians can be used by speech teachers to demonstrate and reinforce the importance of these elements in our students' speeches.

For instance, some comedians create standup routines which revolve around a specific agenda of topics, and they move from one topic to another just as our students are expected to move from one main point to another. These comedians provide supporting evidence that clarifies the topic they are discussing just as our students provide supporting evidence to clarify their main points.

One popular example of such a comedian is Bill Cosby. Cosby began to achieve popularity as a comedian in the late fifties and early sixties and remains popular with audiences today. His comedy routines often center around family life and feature a topical organization that emerges from the behaviors and activities of the experiences he has had with his family both as a child and as an adult and parent himself. A typical routine (Cosby, 1982) starts with a discussion of "getting high" (main point or topic I). During this topic Cosby talks about marijuana, cocaine and alcohol (his three subpoints). Cosby then moves to a description of going to the dentist's office (main point or topic II). During this topic Cosby talks about the instruments the Dentist uses, Dentists' tendency to talk to us when we cannot talk back and the use of anesthetics (again, three subpoints). The last topic Cosby discusses is a description of raising children (main point or topic III). During this segment Cosby talks about child birth, differences between boys and girls, disciplining children and relationships between children, parents and grandparents (four subpoints this time). In one sense, Cosby's first two points provide an introduction to his presentation in that he even eventually states that his primary reason for being at the performance is to tell the audience about his third point, raising children. But, what is particularly significant in this case is the careful organizational scheme that Cosby creates for this performance. He has a very clear

organizational pattern of main points and subpoints that is obvious upon reviewing his performance. It is also interesting to note that he does not use transitions very often. He shifts gears very quickly and the only transition that is noted from main point to main point is his observation that the topic of raising children is the main reason he is performing for the audience. Even within the main points or topics he tends to move from subpoint to subpoint without transitions.

On the other hand, some comedians' routines are also created to provide little or no continuity or organization. For instance, comedian Steven Wright's (Wright, 1993) comedy routines consist entirely of a series of statements he makes that are complete non sequiturs. There are no organizational patterns nor any sense of a consistent theme in his routine. Audiences must hop from idea to idea literally statement by statement to keep up with Wright. Wright may begin with a statement about his car, then make a statement about his apartment and then move to a statement about his girlfriend. Unlike Cosby, there are no direct connections for the audience to make between these topics. Each statement and/or observation is totally unrelated. The only consistent factor is that most of Wright's observations will be skewed in some way from what is considered "normal" perception.

It is also interesting to note at this point another element of public speaking that Steven Wright has obviously consciously decided not to include in his routine. Wright provides no transitions in his routines. Again, each statement he makes has little or no relationship to any other statement. His routines have no sense of any obvious organizational pattern and no transitional material from idea to idea.

However, while Wright's comedy style precludes the use of transitional material, other comedians very carefully craft transitional material to take them from one topic to another. Dennis Miller is one such comedian. Miller sometimes uses very simple and direct transitions, such as "So, how about that . . ." or "So, what else is up in the world?" However, sometimes Miller uses some very elaborate and

clever transitions. For instance, in one routine, he spends a good deal of time telling many jokes and stories about airplanes and airports. His commentary on airplanes and airports makes up one of the "main points" of the "body" of his routine. When Miller needs to switch to his next "main point," which is psychology, he asks the audience if they think that birds at airports have poor self-images looking at the large aircraft at the airports. He then makes a reference to Freud advancing the theory of "fuselage envy," then uses the reference to Freud to segue into his next "main point," psychology. Such a transition is very clever and well crafted.

It is further interesting to note that while Steven Wright tends not to use transitions in his routines, he does make some very conscious choices stylistically to help his audience keep up with his abrupt shifts from idea to idea. His delivery style is a complete monotone and his rate of delivery is very slow. He uses frequent pauses and stops speaking for much longer periods of time than most comedians. During these periods Wright typically just stares at his audience. He stands in one place and oscillates his head to take in all of his audience. These stylistic choices allow audiences much more time to process Wright's material and to keep up with his routine despite his obvious lack of organization and transitions, which would normally provide audiences cues to keep up with his routine.

Wright's style certainly contrasts with most comedians and provides many interesting comparisons for public speaking students so that they may directly see the consequences of making specific choices in the construction and delivery of their speeches. Comedians such as Cosby provide some very useful contrasts in terms of organization, transitions and aspects of vocal delivery. Cosby, for instance, is much more dynamic vocally. He uses a wide range of speech melody, imitates other person's voices and uses a wide range of volume. Both comedians are also interesting to compare in their use of physical delivery. Wright tends to stand in one place, occasionally moving, and when he does move, he is usually very deliberate

and slow. He rarely gestures, and again, when he does they are very slow and deliberate and exaggerated. Cosby is much more dynamic physically. Even though he often sits a chair now during his routine, he also tends to use broad, wide gestures and very exaggerated facial expressions (Cosby, 1982, 1987). Certainly many comedians rely heavily on specific vocal and physical delivery choices to make their presentations lively and interesting. Standup comedy clips can provide many useful examples of dynamic vocal delivery choices that comedians make, such as using volume, projection, speech melody, rate and pauses, and physical delivery choices that comedians make, such as movement, gestures, posture and facial expressions. At the same time there are also several comedians, such as Wright, who rely less on dynamic physical and vocal delivery choices, which can also be used to demonstrate to students what the lack of these choices do to a presentation.

It is also interesting to note how some comedians seem to use a combination of both the organizational style of Cosby and the lack of organizational style of Wright. Dennis Miller's comedy style, as noted in the previous discussion on introductions is one illustration of this. Miller organizes his routines in a manner that uses both Wright's lack of clear organizational strategies and Cosby's closer attention to clearer organizational patterns. Miller begins his comedy routines with several minutes of brief, scattershot observations on many disparate topics, subjects and ideas, just as Wright does in his whole routine. However, Miller also eventually generally moves to a few topics that he takes to task on a more in-depth basis, as Cosby does in his whole routine.

These are but a few of the elements and functions of the body of the speech that can be amplified and demonstrated through carefully selected video clips of standup comedians. Again, we have but to use our imaginations and creativity to find many more applications of these materials to teaching students the options available to them in creating and delivering the bodies of their speeches.

The Conclusion

Many beginning communication course textbooks encourage students to consider several different functions or objectives to achieve when creating the conclusion to a speech. Some of these functions or objectives include; signaling the end of the speech, summarizing the main points of the speech and providing appropriate closure for the speech (Beebe and Beebe, 1994; Gronbeck, Mckerrow, Ehlinger and Monroe, 1990; Osborn and Osborn, 1991; and Samovar and Mills, 1988).

Some standup comics are very abrupt in ending their routines. For instance, toward the end of his routine, Dennis Miller returns to making several brief observations on topics related to current events and news, concludes a joke, waves and says "Thank you very much." In one sense, he does move to a conclusion, but he does not overtly signal that he is concluding by building to dramatic climax or providing a signpost such as "One last joke, folks," for instance. His style of delivery remains consistent throughout his performance.

Steven Wright really does not signal the end of his routine at all. In one particular appearance on The Late Show with David Letterman, Wright merely pause, said "That's enough" and left the stage. Comedian Chris Roc (1993) in an appearance on Evening at the Improv also ended his routine in a similar manner. There was no signal that his routine was coming to an end. He merely waved to the audience, said "Thank you" and left the stage. In viewing tapes of standup comics this style of conclusion seems to be fairly standard.

However, that is not to say that all standup comics end their routines in this abrupt manner. Some standup comics do use different techniques to bring their performances to a conclusion. As noted, some use nonverbal and verbal signals such as waving a hand as to say "good-bye" and saying "Goodnight, and thank you very much." Others build their routines up or down to a stylistic climax.

Because of the nature of standup comedy it is likely that finding examples of different types of concluding styles that fit the models advocated in public speaking will be the most difficult and time consuming to locate. However, that is not to say that such materials will not be available or that teachers of public speaking will be unable to apply these materials to the conclusion of a speech. Certainly, stylistic examples will be abundant, and again, it is very likely that we will be able to demonstrate what the absence of certain principles and concepts connotes to the conclusion of the speech if nothing else.

Non-Structural Elements of Speeches

Of course, there are other aspects of creating and delivering public speeches that we can also amplify and demonstrate for our students through video-taped examples from standup comedians besides elements that are related to the structure of the speech, such as the introduction, organization, transitions, signposts, and conclusion, etc. Just a few of those topics include: the use of language in speeches; visual aids; and demonstrating modes of delivery in public speaking.

For instance, another important aspect of public speaking that we teach our students is to use vivid, clear language in their speeches. This is yet another area in which we can use the routines of standup comics to prove our point to our students. Standup comedy routines provide many interesting and clear examples of vivid, dynamic uses of language. Standup comics use many different figures of speech in their routines, such as hyperbole, allusions, similes, metaphors, and analogies, to name but a few. For instance, Dennis Miller stated in one of his routines: "Sylvester Stallone's acting has the range of a daisy air rifle." This is a very amusing and very clear example of using a metaphor. Miller also frequently uses similes in his routines and he also frequently provides allusions to famous films. The very nature of standup comedy requires careful attention to the use of language and these

materials could prove invaluable in teaching students to carefully examine their use of language in their speeches. In an article in The Speech Communication Teacher, the author of this paper offers an exercise for students to perform in class that demonstrates the use of figures of speech in several different contexts (Siddens, 1994). This exercise could also very easily be reconstructed to allow students to work with video-taped examples of standup comedians uses of figures of speech in their routines.

Another aspect of public speaking we teach our students is the use of visual aids. Visual aids and properties have long been a part of many comedians' routines. Jack Benny and Henny Youngman played violins, contemporary comedian Gallagher uses gigantic sofas, fruit and sledge hammers. Many comedians use musical instruments in their routines, as well as many other materials. We tell our students that using visual aids will make their speeches more interesting, memorable and clear for their audiences. Again, citing examples from standup comedy routines can help prove these concepts to our students. Two contemporary comedians who rely heavily on visual aids are Howie Mandell (1983) and Gallagher (1990).

For instance, Mandell carries a bag on stage with him that is shaped like a hand. He refers to it as his "hand-bag." He wears a shirt which has toy stuffed alligators sewn to it. He refers to this as his "alligator-shirt." A portion of his routine centers around the use of props and visual aids. He works with eyeglasses, baby dolls, a Santa hat, a doctor's bag and several other items. A trademark of his routine takes place when places a surgical glove over his head and blows it up.

Gallagher is also well known for his elaborate uses of properties and visual aids. His audiences frequently wear raincoats and cover themselves in plastic because of his antics using properties and visual aids. He uses items such as an airhorn, a large plastic elephant head whose trunk is a squirt gun, cans of silly string, an old-fashioned bathtub full of props, and different colored wigs. He has

also used a large plastic suit that makes the wearer look like a "muscle-man." He has also placed audience members in a huge plastic ball in which they can stand and roll around on the stage. Of course, Gallagher's trademark also revolves around the use of visual aids. he usually ends his act by smashing various items such as fruits and vegetables with sledge hammers.

These are but two examples of comedians who use props and visual aids. There are many, many other comedians who use also props and visual aids in their routines. Often the use of such materials makes a mediocre comedian a very funny comedian, but they can also make a very good comedian bomb if they are not used properly. The same is true of visual aids in speeches. Students have to carefully prepare their visual aids and rehearse with them to use them to their full potential. These points, and others, can be clearly demonstrated to students with the proper use of video clips of comedians used as visual aids in our teaching strategies.

We can also use clips of video-taped standup comedians to help our students see how different modes of public speaking function and to demonstrate different applications of the different modes of public speaking. Many of our public speaking classes focus on teaching our students the extemporaneous style of speaking, but few, if any, standup comedians use notecards. However, most standup comedians do use the memorized style of public speaking and many participate in impromptu public speaking. For instance, Mark Pitha has a segment of his standup routine in which he suggests that rock bands should tour based on their names. He then offers several examples to demonstrate his point: "ELO and REM at BYU;" "Talking Heads with Simple Minds;" and "Meatloaf and Bread together again." He then asks his audience to provide him with a band's name and he offers to provide an accompanying band. One band named was the Grateful Dead. Pitha responded with Suicidal Tendencies. Another suggestion was AC/DC. Pitha replied Boy George. A third example was Madonna. Pitha came back with Supertramp. This was a very clever example of a

very risky strategy. Pitha demonstrated a very strong ability to improvise and work in an impromptu situation.

There are many other structural and non-structural elements of public speaking that we can demonstrate to our students through these means. These were but a few brief examples.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper has investigated the use of stand-up comedy routines to demonstrate principles of public speaking to college students in contemporary communication classes. Particular elements of public speaking that have been investigated include: (1) introductions; (2) the body of the speech, including organization, visual aids, transitions, signposts, aspects of vocal and physical delivery; and (3) conclusions.

This paper has sought to illustrate connections that exist between the principles of public speaking and the behaviors that are exhibited in standup comedy routines. Since standup comedy is so popular with contemporary audiences this paper argues that students will be receptive to studying principles of public speaking by demonstrating the use of parallel principles and behaviors in this performance medium. Many beginning communication course textbooks argue that one way of persuading an audience is to present similar examples within different contexts to demonstrate their flexibility and usefulness. This method is one way of practicing what we preach. We can demonstrate to students that the principles of public speaking we are teaching them apply to many different modes of performance; that they are not abstract concepts that have no application outside of the classroom. In fact, it may be possible to use clips from films and plays, as well as passages from novels to further amplify how these principles can be applied to real life situations and performance situations outside of public speaking.

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